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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the issue of the loss of less competent children from schools as a result of the emphasis upon academic excellence. Studies are cited indicating that more than 90 percent of all secondary principals feel that their schools are improving; yet, as many as 25 percent of all children in a given sixth-grade class will drop out before graduation. The national push in education to raise test scores by emphasizing cognitive factors is seen as detrimental to other factors in the lives of children and encourages success primarily in those who are easy to teach. Less competent students are being squeezed out of the school system; as a result test scores are rising, which gives the appearance that excellence is being achieved. In actuality, excellence is not an event, but a process. What the process is and what can be done to protect the interests of all students in the educational process are questions raised. Three research findings on effective schools are examined: safety in the school and its environment, high expectations of success, and the role and characteristics of the principal as an instructional leader. Included are eight references. (WTH)

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THE DARK SIDE OF THE EXCELLENCE MOVEMENT

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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News about schools these days is mixed. According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals, more than 90% of all secondary principals think their schools are improving and sixty-eight percent of that group cite the lack of money as their major problem. Two-thirds of them agree that national attention helped bring about improvements.¹

At the same time, we are told that 25% of all children in a given sixth grade class will drop out before graduation.² In a middle-sized city - Boston, Indianapolis, San Francisco - that means 20 kids drop out each week. Detroit, Los Angeles, and other large urban districts lose twice that many.

More bad news: as many as one-fifth of American secondary students show signs of chronic stress.³ Every minute a teenager attempts suicide. Every day, one of them succeeds. And the "real" numbers could be four times as high.⁴

Besides the dropout and suicide problems, schools are faced with real hard issues in the areas of adult illiteracy, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, the predicted proliferation of AIDS. In the face of an impending teacher shortage, statistics say 40% of new teachers leave within three years.⁵

How could so many principals feel their schools are improving in spite of such disturbing data?

There is a dark side to the excellence movement.

While the last major drive in education was to do something for the poor and for special kids - a humanitarian drive, the current push is nationalistic - to raise test scores - and it has been addressed almost exclusively as a cognitive phenomenon.⁶

When we focus on cognitive factors to the detriment of other important factors in the lives of our children, the rich in our country get richer and the poor get poorer. Every time we raise the top, we stretch it out further from the bottom and there is a real danger of an elitist result.

Alonzo Crim, superintendent of the Atlanta Public Schools, says, "We have come a long way toward including all children, but mainly we have done a good job with the children who are easiest to educate."⁷

All schools want to be "excellent." And we speak of "excellence" as if it were a place - a Nirvana. It's as if we think we can add some graduation requirements, tighten up the attendance policy, buy a few more books for the library and suddenly some great authority somewhere will decree that we have indeed reached the sacred state of "Excellence." Excellence is not a place or an event. Excellence is a process.

The question is, "What is the process and what can be done to protect the interests of all students as we push to improve the educational process?"

Educators often moan about how schools are asked to do everything for students, not only to sharpen their technical, business and academic skills but to solve all their social problems as well. We say that's too much. And it is. Schools can't do it all, but we don't have to choose one to the detriment of the other, either.

Let's take another look at three research findings on effective schools and this time let's look at them with equity issues in mind.

1. Excellent schools must provide a safe and orderly environment. Not all of us can take physical safety in school for granted. Ron Edmunds had to build a 25' fence around his school so he could keep his students safe. People who work and study in Detroit schools and New York schools and schools in some other cities may confront violence in the building and on the grounds as a daily routine. Students and staff who have to keep looking over their shoulder to make sure they're not going to be physically attacked can't give much attention to their studies.

Most schools today probably don't have to focus all their efforts on protecting the physical welfare of their students. But there's another kind of problem with safety and hardly any school is immune:

Is it safe to think in your school?

Are there classes where brainstorming and creativity are encouraged, activities where there is no one "right" answer? Is there time to think in your school?

Usually we're not really too concerned with teaching thinking skills, we just want the "right" answer quickly. And, ironically, we give the academically able more time to think about the answer than we do others. We expect the able to come up with what we're looking for so we'll wait, but we're so sure the others won't know the answer, we decide we won't "waste our time."

And the only "right" answer is ours. So we give most of our attention to the students (or teachers, if we're the principal) who will parrot our favorite answer the quickest. In other words, we love most the students and teachers who are most like us.

Is it safe to be different in your school?

Sally in the eighth grade was fat and wore bibbed overalls. She was a "lippy" kid who didn't take orders too well. She was not docile, not easily taught.

One day I was summoned to her school because she had been particularly difficult in English class. The teacher had told her to write each spelling word ten times as it was called out, look up the meaning of each and copy it down and use all the spelling words in a story which was to be a page in length.

Sally objected to this lesson plan. She told the teacher she already knew how to spell the words so there was no need to write each one ten times. She said

she knew what they meant so there was no need to look each one up in the dictionary. She said she had used every word correctly in a story but the story was only a half page long and that was all she had to say.

I sympathized with the teacher but secretly felt Sally had some good points in her argument, especially since she had indeed spelled all the words correctly, had given the correct definitions and had used them correctly in her half-page story.

I suggested a compromise which I thought would take everyone off the hook. "Why not send her to the library when she gets done with her assignment before she's supposed to?" I figured that sending her to the library would get Sally out of the teacher's hair and I knew Sally loved to read and would be thrilled to go to the library.

But the answer was "No." That wouldn't do at all, they explained to me. Only "good" kids get to go to the library.

So there we were, each of us entrenched in our own reality and no one would win. In that school, Sally would always be a bad kid. Of course it goes without saying that she hated school and was truant at every opportunity.

Is it safe to be independent in your school?

Seymour B. Sarason of Yale University says that one reason school reform movements don't get too far is that educators are caught in a dilemma between teaching dependence and independence.

While we talk about training kids to think independently, a lot of education, special ed in particular, is training in dependence and conformity, not independence. Much of schooling requires dependence for success. Some of the acting out in schools comes from the creative effort of students to be an independent self in the machine, to acquire an identity in spite of the system. You have to learn to be a "student." (In higher education the dependency phenomenon is emphasized because professors certainly are not looking for independent thinkers. They're looking for clones.)

Imagine my disgruntlement one fall when one of my students in American history insisted he had already taken the class in the eighth grade and shouldn't have to take it again. He said he believed he could accurately describe many major events in American history and didn't see why he had to repeat the course. All my protests about grade eleven history being more challenging than that offered at a level where you didn't earn a credit were exposed as mere posturing. Facts of history don't change from one grade to the next. The student's ability to learn the material he was taught and retain it over a span of years was irrelevant in comparison to the decision that every student must earn a credit in American history in high school. He had run up against the system and was sentenced to sit in the class again, no matter what.

The successful student in too many of our schools is the one who never questions the directions and opinions of the teacher, who demonstrates absolute dependency on the teacher to say what should be done, when, and how. (The student considered "successful" in our schools rarely asks why.)

Something happens between elementary and junior high to deflate children. We manage to pressure too many of them into becoming passive receivers of information. Information is not knowledge. Information is the lowest level of Bloom's taxonomy.

2. Excellent schools provide a climate of high expectations of success.

But who defines success for whom?

My high school principal told me in front of my mother that I would never amount to anything. For some kids that message would have been devastating. In my case, it was strike two. His low opinion of me and the fact that I already knew I would be successful as a female only if I married well, left me feeling depressed and very pessimistic about my future. College for girls like me was a place to find a future husband. The pursuit of a satisfying career was never mentioned. I was all primed for strike three in college because I went there bereft of personal ambition or guidance from teachers.

This story has a happy ending, however. Imagine my delight when, at my thirtieth high school reunion, I related the principal's prediction in front of him and my former classmates and then announced that I was at that very moment a high school principal myself. "I leave it up to Mr. D _____," I said, "to decide if I ever amounted to anything or not."

Life is very seldom that sweet.

The point is that I never forgot his prophecy. He had decided, based on his judgment of my behavior and general bad attitude that my destiny was to be a failure. For a while there, I believed him. Principals and teachers have a very powerful influence on our lives. Students are expected to show respect toward school officials and their opinions. After all, they have been appointed to give wise instruction. It's only natural then that students will believe their mentors when they tell them who they are.

Patricia Graham, Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education says, "Equal educational opportunity does not mean that poor black children and rich white children can both attend the same school and take courses that will help them adjust to life according to their probable destinies".

Equal educational opportunity requires the content of the curriculum available to all children to enable and encourage them to be more than they ever thought they could be.

The essence of equal opportunity is not probable destiny, but an increase in the options available to children so that their destiny may be chosen, not simply a consequence of the circumstances of birth or geography.

On a recent accreditation visit, I was appalled to hear, for the first time in many years, a teacher openly refer to the "good" kids who take college prep classes as opposed to "these" kids. And he said this in front of his students in basic math. The teacher acted as if "these kids in basic math" had no feelings or had all of a sudden become deaf (as well as dumb, according to his thinking.)

In another school I visited, the poor kids had green trays and stood in a separate line from the "a la carte" and "salad bar" kids with speckled trays. They shared the same room in the same school but they stared at each other across thousands of social miles.

One of the teachers there told me she had asked her daughter, a tenth grader at the school, to eat the hot lunch on this certain day because she had to attend a faculty meeting and wouldn't be home to cook supper. The daughter said, "Mother, please don't ask me to eat the hot lunch. That food's for the poor kids."

Tracking and labelling, the old bugaboos of the 60's and early 70's are back again. And this time some of us would have them waving the American flag.

Educators must do something to prevent a regrettable history from repeating itself. If we send messages to certain of our students that they are less competent, less beautiful, less able, less wanted, we squeeze them out just as we did in the dark ages of educational practice when it was expected that less than half the students would graduate from high school.

We pick at the ones who don't fit, sore already. If they get uncomfortable enough to leave, we look better. With the incompetent, the disruptive, and the less able removed, test scores will rise and we may claim the crown of "excellence."

In Houston an incentive program pays students with a free movie and amusement park tickets when they come to school, behave themselves and achieve. Is it wrong to bribe kids? Attendance has improved to the highest level in twenty years.

Tests are very useful tools when the results are thoroughly reviewed and used to make well thought-out changes in the curriculum and to set the agenda for inservice programs.

Tests are tyrannical when they are used to segregate and compare students and teachers.

As we well know, teachers are not immune from testing. David Vold of the University of Alabama says that teacher competency tests will cut out illiterates and fools, but will not guarantee that all who pass are competent. "Moreover," he adds, "such testing might weed out some who, far from being incompetent, are just different".⁸

We must guard against that tragic result for the sake of creative students as well as creative teachers.

High expectations have far more to do with attitude than with test scores and the number of graduation requirements. A major irony in the excellence movement is that requirements have been increased in an attempt to improve the quality of the program and what happens is that as requirements are increased, expectations of success for all kids decrease.

If a track coach has a kid who can't jump a four foot bar, will raising the bar to four and a half feet make that kid be able to jump higher? What that kid needs is more and better coaching.

If we raise standards without helping teachers learn how to help students more, it simply means that more students fail.

And we must believe that everyone can change. Old bad habits can give way to better habits in the right setting. As leaders, it is our responsibility to model change for the better, to demonstrate in our own behavior a pattern of optimal adulthood. Every time one of us adults quits smoking, adopts an exercise program, or talks about the horrors of drug abuse, we are teaching in the most effective possible way, through our own behavior.

3. In the most successful schools, the principal is an instructional leader.

Major advancements have taken place in school administration and supervision since the late '60's and early '70's, the "war years" when the emphasis was on doing your own thing. Back then the school administrator was a symbol of authority just like parents and police and military officers, and we all took our lumps. Nobody loved the principal.

Today's administrators are included in practical inservice opportunities along with teachers. Thanks to educators like Madeline Hunter, a common vocabulary is being developed that allows us to understand each other when we talk about the teaching/learning process. Although we may have learned our lessons well in college, all of us practitioners need to be reminded of the basics we already know.

We've learned how to help good teachers be better ones and how to build a case for incompetency when it's necessary. With all the help currently available to us, we are becoming more competent and confident in our professional duties.

Effective principals are people directors, not program directors. They sell education. The best advice I ever got about being a good principal came from Nate Blackman of Chicago Metro. He told me it was my duty to stand right by the main office and smile every day no matter what. People needed to see the school leader looking cheerful. He was right. I smiled until my jaws ached some days but everyone checked in and thought everything was okay when they saw my smile.

Good principals are articulate. All of us need brush-up sessions on communication skills - writing memos, letters, reports, talking face-to-face, on the phone, to large or small groups, to people we don't like, to people who don't like us, when to write, when to talk instead, how to keep records. We must learn that no matter how important we think we are and how trivial that other person's need seems to be, we can no longer depend on bluster and intimidation to get our way.

A good principal is unselfish and fearless. That principal has learned that power is not measurable like so many beans in a jar to be doled out sparingly one bean at a time in fear that soon all the beans will be gone. Now we know that power is an infinite entity like love. The more we give away, the more we have.

Empowerment of the people around us multiplies our power. As a principal once told me when he gave me credit publicly for a job well done: "When you look good, I look good."

Good principals excel at loose control.

They are flexible - open to new ideas but consistently measure them against established school goals.

They promote cohesiveness. They have staff meetings instead of faculty meetings. All adult employees assigned to the school are urged to attend and participate in discussion and decision-making activities. Inservice is provided for all staff, sometimes as a total group, sometimes for special interests.

They involve all staff in school improvement projects such as accreditation/evaluation teams, quality of life workshops, interview committees, school advisory groups.

They are visible as supporters instead of always as supervisors.

They are visionaries and share their vision even if it means reading aloud from something inspirational at staff meetings. (They will even risk making fools of themselves if they believe in what they're doing.)

They recognize accomplishments and reward them. They have discovered that they can get everyone to staff meetings on time if they begin each meeting with "News." News is announcements of who's a new grandparent, who's lost weight, who was bowler of the week, as well as accomplishments connected with education.

They collaborate. They ask for ideas. They work for consensus in decision-making rather than relying on majority vote.

They successfully use strategies to identify the talented people around them and delegate the right task to the right people. Then the good principal leaves them alone to do their work.

They focus on the teaching and learning process. They participate in it by teaching sample lessons, by being the first to volunteer to be videotaped for teaching critiques, by knowing the styles of the teachers and expressing appreciation for their individual contributions.

They talk to students, all of them, even the "problem" students about the mission of the school. They remind students of why they are in school.

Good principals are courageous because they know they will often be alone and they will sometimes fail.

However well-intentioned the push toward excellence, we must forever be on guard against the danger that our schools will become institutions for the easily taught. We must remain vigilant lest "excellence" becomes an entity measured in large part by numbers and destiny is determined by demographics. We must never become content to let test-makers control the curriculum of our schools.

Empowerment for every child must be our goal. To make that happen, we must see to it that a great variety of choices is made available to them, not arranged on a vertical scale of smart to dumb or rich to poor, but extended and broadened to include aptitudes and talents not necessarily inflamed by test-taking.

Otherwise, in a fit of rage against the difficult and vulnerable children, we may well find ourselves a citizenry which respects only the cognitive processes, a result which will see the affective component atrophy and lead us into a milieu of insensitive misfits.

Excellence is not an event, it's a process. Change comes at the individual school level, not from above, on top, by edict, or from great manifestos on excellence. We must continually re-think the way we measure success and be fearless and indefatigable in the search for humane as well as data-driven educational prescriptions for our students.

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- ¹NASSP News Leader. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (Reston, VA:February 6, 1987.)
 - ²From an address by Archie LaPointe at the Testing and Measurement Conference, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, February 26, 1986.
 - ³Education USA. The National School Public Relations Association (Washington, D.C.:19 May 1986.)
 - ⁴"Suicide", University Health Service Bulletin. The University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, MI:January 1986).
 - ⁵Education USA. The National School Public Relations Association (Washington, D.C.:9 March 1987.)
 - ⁶From an address by William Morris, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, April 15, 1985.
 - ⁷From an address by Alonzo Crim, School of Education National Conference, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, September 1986.
 - ⁸David Vold. "The Roots of Teacher Testing in America," Educational Measurement (Fall 1985).